New mass protests against US-backed regimes in Egypt and Yemen

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Tens of thousands of Egyptians poured into Tahrir Square in Cairo Friday to mark two weeks since the fall of hated dictator Hosni Mubarak and to protest the lack of real change. Meanwhile, a strike wave in Egypt continues, with industrial action extended to virtually every sector of the economy.

The largest protests in Yemen in the current wave of unrest took place the same day, as hundreds of thousands demonstrated against the continued rule of Washington's ally, President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Some 50,000 or more marched in the capital Sana'a, while as many as 100,000 people participated in protests in Taiz, in the southwest of the country.

While the White House remains silent, or threatens to intervene in Libya to take control of its oil supply, masses of people in Middle East and North Africa press onward in an effort to rid themselves of corrupt, tyrannical regimes that have ruled for decades with the full backing of the US, Britain, France and other imperialist powers.

In Egypt, the protesters in Cairo and other cities February 25 were especially outraged by the shuffling of Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq's cabinet this week, which kept numerous Mubarak cronies in positions of power. Shafiq is the former head of the Egyptian air force and a cabinet minister under Mubarak.

On Thursday, the day before the latest rallies, the ruling military council issued a statement that it would "take all steps to fulfill its promises, so that there is no return to the past and the sublime goal is to achieve the hopes and aspirations of this great nation."

Public hostility toward the military is growing, despite these soothing words. The *Christian Science Monitor* noted that " 'Counterrevolution' was a buzzword among the crowd" on Friday.

Reuters reported that activists chanted, "We do not want Shafiq any more, even if they shoot us with bullets" and "Revolution until victory, revolution against Shafiq and the palace." Some of the protesters gathered around the cabinet building, shouting, "We won't leave! He will go!"—the same chant used in the protests to oust Mubarak.

A banner at the Tahrir Square protest read, "Shafiq's government is subservient to the corrupt regime." One demonstrator, a museum curator, told the *Christian Science Monitor*, "This is not what hundreds of people died to achieve.… Ahmed Shafiq is a student of Mubarak. We have demanded a new beginning, and Ahmed Shafiq is not a part of it. We refuse him."

A 32-year-old protester commented to the Associated Press, "Mubarak is still free and moving around. His sons and his wife and the members of his regime are still moving freely, except for a few scapegoats." He noted that the military benefited from Mubarak's rule, adding, "It's the people who have to force the army to change. If we leave it to the army, we'll be back to dictatorship again."

Demonstrators in Cairo demanded the dissolution of the hated secret police, infamous for repression and torture.

Haaretz, the Israeli newspaper, noted Friday popular suspicion that the murder of a Coptic (Egyptian Christian) priest February 23 in Asyut, which provoked protests both in that city and Cairo, might have been the work of the security apparatus. Such episodes, blamed on religious extremism, "could justify keeping emergency regulations in place," which "give the security forces unlimited power to repress political opposition and arrest its supporters."

"Interreligious violence—completely absent during the revolution—would provide a good excuse," writes Haaretz, "for 'restoring order,' for the police and army to be used to stop reforms."

Crowds in Cairo on Friday also demonstrated in solidarity with the Libyan people, chanting, "Down with Gaddafi!" and waving Libyan flags.

Reuters reported demonstrations Friday by tens of thousands in Ismailia, Arish, Suez and Port Said. Some 7,000 people marched in Suez, demanding a new constitution, the removal of Shafiq and the resignation of the local governor. In Ismailia, in northeast Egypt, on the west bank of the Suez Canal, "over 10,000 people demonstrated," according to the wire service, "saying that the 'revolution was not over and it has not achieved all of its goals.' "

Large numbers of Egyptian workers are carrying on their offensive for wages, decent living conditions, an end to corruption, and democracy in the workplace.

Al-Masry Al-Youm (the Egyptian daily newspaper) online, in its English edition, reported Friday on at least a dozen new strikes or protests.

Hundreds of mine workers staged a sit-in Thursday in Bahariya Oasis, in northern Egypt, to protest "poor living conditions." Some 50 Ministry of Religious Endowments workers meanwhile demanded salary increases, and dozens of temporary agricultural supervisors protested for permanent positions.

Al-Masry Al-Youm also took note of a demonstration in the Port Said area: "Hundreds of residents in the village of Radwan demanded investigations into violations regarding the sale of land

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allotted for college graduates (under the Mubarak project for young graduates) without official permission.

"In Beni Suef [an agricultural center on the Nile, some 120 kilometers south of Cairo], 1000 new graduates, workers, and teachers protested for the second day in a row in front of the Education Ministry building in the governorate. They called for real and permanent job opportunities. Protesters tried to storm the building but security forces stopped them.… They threatened to storm the teachers' union and set the Education Ministry building on fire if their demands are not met."

In Suez, some 1,200 steel workers blocked a main road, complaining that the appropriate government agencies had not yet intervened to solve their problems and meet their demands. Workers at the Egypt Amiron steel pipe-making firm are continuing their sit-in at company headquarters, over pay and working conditions. "In Kafr al-Sheikh, bus drivers in the city of Desouk went on strike to protest the increasing cost of their insurance."

In Aswan, some 700 workers at the Al-Nasr mining company in Edfu presented a protest to their official union, demanding a new temporary administrative committee composed of workers and announcing their "withdrawal of confidence" from the existing union committee.

Ahram (another Egyptian newspaper) noted February 25 thousands of labor and other kinds of protests in the wake of Mubarak's downfall. "In one day," the Egyptian website wrote, "in downtown Cairo, passersby could cross a group of workers of Nile Enterprise for Cotton staging a sit-in in front of the prosecutor-general's office, a group of teachers outside the ministry of education and employees of the recently privatized chain Omar Effendi protesting at the company's headquarter."

Haaretz reported the same day that "thousands of workers throughout Egypt continue their strike for higher wages and the ouster of corrupt management.… Anger is brewing below the surface, threatening to erupt as more time passes without the hoped-for changes being made and the demands being swiftly met."

The Israeli newspaper referred to the case of a tile factory in the Gulf of Suez, whose owner, Mohamed Abou El Enein, "is a senior figure in Mubarak's National Democratic Party." More than 9,000 workers at his five plants launched a protest over Enein's refusal to discuss their various pay demands. According to the Egyptian daily *Al-Shuruq*, the owner sent in armed gangs to smash the protest.

Haaretz also reported that "some 1,800 workers in an agricultural processing facility in the southern part of the country threatened to set it on fire if their demands for fair wages were not met."

Yemen protests

The tens of thousands who marched in Sana'a, Yemen's capital, reported Reuters, chanted "The people demand the downfall of the regime."

Wall Street Journal correspondent observed, "Outside Sana'a university, where students have been camped out for weeks, the streets were flooded with people. More than 30,000 people attended Friday prayers at the university, to show their support and to mourn the death of two protesters who were shot and killed late Tuesday night by government loyalists.… Local media reported between 50,000 and 80,000 antigovernment demonstrators."

Many women participated in the protests, chanting "Out, out!" and "God bears witness to your acts, Abdullah," referring to Yemen's longtime president, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The government deployed massive numbers of police and military. The authorities claim their concern is to prevent clashes between the anti-government protesters and pro-Saleh forces, allegedly incited and paid by the government. The latter, although far smaller in number, have been allowed to launch violent attacks on the anti-Saleh forces over the past 10 days. Dozens of demonstrators have been killed in the attacks.

One of the speakers at the massive protest rally in Sana'a, Tawakul Kermal, addressing Saleh, declared, "We are coming to take you from the presidential palace." Protest organizers termed Friday's protests "the beginning of the end" for the regime.

In Taiz, the *New York Times* commented that "as many as 100,000 demonstrators held Friday Prayer in unison as a local cleric preached to the crowds of men and women sitting on the pavement." The crowd later "burst out into the kind of chant that has echoed across the Arab world since the Tunisian revolution: 'The people want the regime to fall.' "

A demonstration of at least 10,000 took place in the southern Yemeni port city of Aden, where security forces used tear gas and fired bullets in the air to disperse crowds. In the city's Mansour district, protesters stormed a city council building and set a government vehicle on fire.

Yemen Post on Thursday described the anti-government protests as continuing in every province of the country.

Saleh, who wields little power outside Sana'a, is desperately maneuvering with the bourgeois opposition parties in an attempt to maintain himself in power. In this effort, he has the full backing of the Obama administration, which considers his regime a key ally in the "war on terror."

The Yemeni president announced on Thursday the formation of a committee to open a discussion with opponents. The country's official news agency, SABA, explained that Saleh ordered his prime minister to head the five-man committee to "have a constructive and open dialogue with the young brothers, including protesters…and to listen to their conditions and visions."

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